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Composing in the Discomfort of Institutional Violence

Cruz Medina

It's been a dozen years since my first publication in *Composition Studies*, Volume 39, Number 2. I wrote a book review for an edited collection on writing program administration after a WPA course with Ed White. Future CCCC chair Asao Inoue was the book editor at the time, so thinking back on that experience has me feeling a bit like Forrest Gump in his montage with notable historical figures. The archive of the last 50 years suggests that the journal has followed, and in some cases led, in the shifts of the field; from early pedagogically-oriented writing to more postmodern theory taken from the influence of literature, the journal has focused on composition as a field and what concerns the field. I deeply appreciate the innovations in topics in *Composition Studies*, such as the special issue on comics (43.1) that I used for teaching; the course designs, such as "Decolonial Theory and Methodology" (46.1), that I have conversely used for research; and the articles that helped to push the field in directions that many researchers have wanted or never even knew to ask for. For this celebratory moment, I have chosen to discuss Aja Martinez's 2014 article, "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story versus Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's 'Fit' in the Academy." This article might fall into the category of research, a kind research with which the field has had an uncomfortable relationship because it disrupts and complicates narratives of institutional white supremacy. In Martinez's article, she advocates for critical race theory (CRT) counterstory and shares the vulnerable experience of being a graduate student of color (with a research interest centered on race) in a graduate program that is in its resistance to this interest, emblematic of the field. But her research that would continue and become her 2020 book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Martinez and I were in the same graduate program, so re-reading her article took me back to my own experiences, and I found myself needing to stop and take breaks. The counterstory dialogue triggered relatable feelings of uncertainty from graduate school, where the future seems to hinge on every CV line and networking opportunity. The uncertainty Martinez captures was, of course, exacerbated by cultural and ethnic differences with the composite characters of the professors in a program that identified itself as central to the field of rhetoric and composition. Martinez's definitions of "stock" and "majoritarian" stories help to explain how her narrative functions: "These [majoritarian] stories privilege whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural

or normative points of reference” (Martinez, “A Plea” 51). As her stock story illustrates, these differences leave many graduate students of color feeling as though they fall short of their professors’ ideal expectations by default. In Martinez’s counterstory, the use of “fit”—a term that has since come under fire and is advised against using in job searches—represents the homogeneous replication of whiteness that Martinez points out (Flaherty).

Martinez’s article contributes to the groundwork for what others and I have been able to do with critical race theory (CRT) and anti-racist scholarship. On a personal note, I also feel indebted to Aja Martinez for successfully negotiating what had been a predominantly white program, thereby making my own experience much less traumatic.¹ In “A Plea,” one of Martinez’s composite tenured professor characters, Tanner, grapples with how the race-conscious research of Alejandra (our protagonist) “fits” within the program. The sympathetic but untenured character, Hayden, helps to articulate: “I think her work is difficult for us to wrap our minds around because it’s unconventional, probably by and large due to the fact that she approaches it from a perspective we’re not trained in or accustomed to” (43). The untenured professor, Hayden, provides a perspective that presages the growing acceptance of anti-racism in the field (e.g. in special issues, like *Composition Studies* 49.2, in 2021, guest edited by Ersula Ore, Christina Cedillo, and Kim Wieser, where the theme and contributors push for a move beyond diversity to transformation for the purpose of justice). These conversations—in print and in dialogue—are strengthened, in part, by CRT scholarship that acknowledges the permanence of racism and values the experiential knowledge of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) and their scholarship.

Martinez’s “Plea” also highlights the dedication of *Composition Studies* to continue the discussion of pedagogy and curricular content that began in the early stages of the journal, while also addressing what is not often taught. The unsympathetic tenured professor character, Tanner, tacitly acknowledges the topic of the hidden curriculum that many graduate students contend with: “Are you seriously suggesting we all, as faculty, shoulder the responsibility of teaching her how to be a student, a scholar, and a professional in our field?” (44). When Tanner questions whether faculty should teach graduate students to be scholars and professionals, I find myself wanting to ask the composite character: If we are not teaching the next generation of graduate students to be students and professionals, then what are we doing?

The resistance that Tanner embodies is institutional, though it is not the objective logic that it purports to be. A defensive logic of white supremacy is communicated by the tenured professor who says: “Alejandra is just not a good fit for this program ... her comments always drew the material back to her comfort zone of social oppression, particular to race...there’s no focus and

no connection or contribution to the field” (42). The student’s research and, by default, the student are “not a good fit,” so much so that Tanner, tenured, threatens the untenured Hayden: “You, Hayden, of all people should be wary of this situation, what with your teaching load and the fact you still have quite a publishing quota to meet before you go up for tenure in a couple years” (44). Such references and reminders serve as a not-so-subtle reminders: this tenured colleague will no doubt serve on a departmental personnel or promotion committee that will evaluate the untenured faculty member’s case for promotion. In the scenes that Martinez constructs, the reader can see the emotional violence and career-altering consequences that racism inflicts on the graduate student. Similarly, the reader can see how those consequences play out against allies who might challenge the status quo.

Although Martinez’s article on counterstory appeared in 2014, the article raised issues that she further builds upon in her book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* (2020). In Louis M. Maraj’s review of *Counterstory* in *Composition Studies* (49.1), Maraj attests to how the book resonated for him in the summer of 2020. In expressing how much the field still needs scholarship like Martinez’s, Maraj explains that:

[T]he first of eight, then nine, core tenets of critical race theory (CRT) highlighted in *Counterstory*’s introduction—still needs reiterating in the fields of rhetoric and writing studies. One might think that by 2021 these disciplines might have gotten it together well enough that our scholars, teachers, and students would not need a monograph like Martinez’s. But here we are. And, yet again, a woman of color is doing the work. (196)

In thinking about the last 50 years of *Composition Studies* the journal, we can see how much the field has changed...and not changed as much as we might have hoped. Maraj captures this sentiment in describing the epigraphs in Martinez’s book: scholarship like this still fights the “widespread ignorance of scholars in our field who ask for justification for CRT methods that have been around for decades” (197). (To further support Maraj’s point, I would add that the Gary Olson chapter about critical race and teaching composition that Martinez mentions in her 2014 article was published in 2003, nearly two decades prior to Maraj’s review.)

As someone who has contributed to *Composition Studies* over the last dozen years, I am appreciative of the kinds of editorial practices that have created space for work like Martinez’s article and the experiential knowledge of BIPOC. Martinez’s “A Plea” helps communicate the important message about trusting voices of color and building knowledge from those experiences. Referencing

CRT's emphasis on experiential knowledge, Martinez explains that "voices from the margins become the voices of authority in the researching and relating of our own experiences" (33). When I submitted the manuscript for what would become my 2019 *Composition Studies* article "Decolonial Potential in a Multilingual FYC" (47.1), then-editor Laura Micciche and former editor Bob Mayberry reminded me of my focus: the students' words and experiences. They helped me to re-see how my predominantly Latinx students had motivated me to write. They facilitated my revisions so that the multilingual students' writing came much earlier, instead of their experiences simply being relegated to the data section. I also felt empowered to voice my own experience in my course design (49.2), where I described teaching a diverse curriculum as professor of color at a predominantly white institution.

Recently, CRT became the rhetorical strawman for then-President Donald Trump to attack: first by misrepresenting CRT in order to stoke his ideological base; then as scapegoat for an executive order banning federal funding from agencies teaching CRT (Samuels). Martinez's description of "stock stories" reveals how power circulates through the repeated lies of white supremacist narratives until they are normalized:

Stock stories feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality. Powerful because they are often repeated until canonized or normalized, those who tell stock stories insist that their version of events is indeed reality, and any stories that counter these standardized tellings are deemed biased, self-interested, and ultimately not credible. (38)

According to the *Washington Post*, Trump's lies (normalized as "false or misleading claims") totaled 30,573 during his four years in the White House (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly). Trump's executive order and lies about CRT point the finger at scholarship that makes racial dynamics clear. One common response—to dismiss Trump's thirty thousand lies by saying that all politicians lie—ignores his appeals to a white nationalist ideology and how his stock stories about the "good people on both sides" contributes to the normalization of racism in courts, schools, and police interactions.

It's important that scholars in rhetoric and composition sit in the discomfort of the violence of institutional white supremacy. Martinez's counterstory about Alejandra reminds us of the material consequences for many in the field who also did not "fit." I am thankful for the many in our field who resemble the composite character Hayden: more prepared to come to terms with how racism operates on all levels of teaching, assessment, and administration. I appreciate this reflective moment to be reflexive about where we still have potential for growth. Without Martinez's article and the vision of the *Composition Studies* editors, my own scholarship and the scholarship of many whom I respect and

cite might not be published, much less considered a part of our field. And this is no small feat. The editors of *Composition Studies* have done this work while maintaining a focus on student writing, pedagogy, and theories that provoke us to rethink how composing and the teaching of writing respond to and influence the world around us.

Notes:

1. It should also be noted that the department's hiring of Adela Licona and Damián Baca (before I started) helped with the cultural shift within the program that I greatly benefited from.

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